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J. LANCASTER BRENT.

By H. D. Barrows.

A very few of our older citizens, both Americans and native Californians, who resided here in the fifties, and who are still living, remember well Joseph Lancaster Brent who was a man of prominence and great influence in Los Angeles during the years of that decade. His recent death at Baltimore awakens many memories of events which occurred here in the olden times, in which Mr. Brent was an actor, or in which he made his influence felt in potent fashion. As a matter of fact, he was one of the most brilliant figures of our early history after California became a State of the American Union.

Mr. Brent was a native of Maryland. He came to Los Angeles in 1850 and immediately acquired the reputation of being a very able lawyer and a very astute politician. He was employed by many rancheros to present and prosecute their Spanish and Mexican land titles before the Land Commission and before the Courts to final confirmation. The Spanish rancheros especially, who felt themselves so helpless before an American Court, came to have unbounded confidence in his ability, and in his fidelity to their interests.

In 1856 he was elected a member of the Legislature, and although a democrat, all parties had confidence in him, and took pride, because of his ability, in sending him to assist in the councils of the State, at Sacramento.

At one time Mr. Brent owned the San Pasqual rancho which included the site of the present city of Pasadena.

Mr. Brent was active in organizing the Democratic party of the State. Although seldom holding official position himself, he was a very astute political manager, and he not only acquired wide political influence among Americans, but he was able to enlist many native Californians as partisans of democracy. It was said, and I believe truly that he influenced the venerable patriarch, Don Julio Verdugo, owner and original grantee of San Rafael rancho, to vote, with his twelve sons, the straight democratic ticket, which, according to tradition, they continued to do, without a bolt, during the remainder of the life of the venerable Don.

During the year 1859, a notable convention of the democratic party of Los Angeles County, was held. At that period, the democracy had everything their own way hereabouts,—their numerical strength as compared with that of the republicans being as two or three or five to one. In fact, they were so strong that they sometimes got into fights amongst themselves.

In the convention to which I refer, Mr. Brent was the leader and manager of one—the stronger—faction, and Mr. Downey was the *Deus ex machina* of the other faction, though both, for the most part, remained invisible during the progress of the convention.

As I wrote an account of the doings of this Convention at that time, for the *San Francisco Bulletin*, of which I was then the regular Los Angeles correspondent, and as Mr. Brent was the silent manager and adviser of one faction, I am tempted to append here, my description of the affair. My letter to the *Bulletin* was dated June 14, 1859. After referring briefly to the fight in the ranks of the harmonious Democracy as continuing with unabated fury, I said:

“The county convention held in this city on the 8th instant, hopelessly split into two factions. * * * Upon the organization of that volcanic body, it appears that one portion found itself in the minority—always a sad predicament, to be sure; but by shrewdness it had secured the chair and committee on credentials almost exclusively on its side, (the side led by Downey). So two precincts—San Jose and La Ballona—were attempted to be excluded, because in one the primary election was held not on the 1st, but on the 6th, and in the other the polls were closed half an hour or an hour before the usual time. At the same time, both are legal precincts and both elections were legally called by the Central Committee, and all that. By quibbles in voting, as to who had a right to vote, etc., and the Chair on call, voting twice, etc., the four votes from these precincts, out of forty in the Convention, were excluded—and that, it is averred, wholly on frivolous pretexts.

Thus, only 36 members were left. Here the Convention split: 19 delegates finding their will checkmated by the gerrymandering disgusted, as they say, with the way things were going on, organized on their own hook—appointed Mr. Parrish, (still resident of this county,) Chairman, admitted the Ballona and San Jose delegates—making their number 23—and went through with their business “according to Hoyle,” and adjourned. The “shadowy 17” also proceeded to business on their own account, and as their opponents wickedly assert, first achieved the absur-

dity of admitting 5 persons as delegates from localities wherein there was neither a legal precinct nor an election ordered; and this, after having adopted in joint convention, a resolution declaring that no delegate should be received who was not chosen in a legal precinct at an election called by the Committee. That their foolishness might not be so apparent, the report containing this resolution was suppressed.

This present correspondent is not much of a politician, and he has no 'ax to grind'—not even a small hatchet—but according to his unsophisticated notions, the case seems a plain one: On a basis of representation to which all agreed, the Parrish Convention was in the majority any way; rejecting all doubtful precincts, and it had 19 members to the other 17; admitting all precincts, and localities not precincts, and it had 23 to the other 22. Of the 13 legal precincts of the county the Parrish Convention had 10—and 23 out of 40 members of the Convention—while their opponents had but 3 precincts and 17 members, who after the break received into church fellowship the 5 unapostolic and unorthodox delegates elected outside of the true and legal fold. So this latter body, composed of various materials, went through lugubrious incubation and hatched out a complete set of chicklets including by 'understanding,' J. G. Downey for Lieut.-Governor."

The foregoing contemporaneous account of that convention, held in this city nearly forty-seven years ago, would be lacking in completeness, unless supplemented by a record of some of the sequels that grew out of it.

As a specimen of successful sharp practice by a minority faction of a political convention, it was, I think, *sui generis*. For that the faction engineered by Downey, of which Charley Ross acted as Chairman, was clearly in the minority, was made manifest at the subsequent general election in the county when most of the local nominees of the Parrish convention were elected.

Notwithstanding the fact that the delegates of the Downey faction of the State Convention from Los Angeles county, only represented a minority clique of the local Democracy, nevertheless they were admitted to the State convention, and Milton S. Latham and John G. Downey were nominated and elected as Governor and Lieut.-Governor, respectively; and as on the second day after the meeting of the Legislature in January, 1860, Latham was elected U. S. Senator, Downey thereby by constitutional provision, became Governor.

And as a further sequel to this result, the constitution of the

State was later amended by the people, prohibiting the election of a Governor as a U. S. senator.

Of the personnel of that county convention when Democracy "was in flower" in Los Angeles county, only E. C. Parrish, I believe, is still living. Charlie Ross was killed in a land quarrel in San Francisco, years ago. And now, Mr. Brent, who, though not a member, was its dominating organizer, has recently passed away.

When the Civil War broke out, in 1861, Mr. Brent, being an ardent sympathizer with the South, went east and joined the Confederacy, and in '64 became a brigadier general. After the war, he settled in Louisiana, where he married, and where, because of his intellectual abilities, he became a prominent and influential citizen. As a member of the Legislature, he did effective work in fighting the Louisiana lottery.

He left a widow and a son and daughter.

Perhaps I should mention one other, though rather unimportant outgrowth of that convention or of the campaign which followed it. A dispute arose between Downey and one of his henchmen, Jose Rubio, a native Californian, in which Rubio accused Downey of not having paid him an "electioneering" debt. In the wrangle, Rubio gave Downey the lie, whereupon Downey knocked Rubio down with his cane, giving him a terrible black eye. Rubio challenged Downey, which the latter refused, as he did not consider the former his equal, etc. The bearer of the belligerent document, Gen. Andres Pico, thereupon, as required by the code duello, challenged the Democratic candidate for Lieutenant Governor. The latter accepted the challenge, and for a time, a fight seemed inevitable; but, by the intervention of friends, matters were amicably adjusted. And so both the Senator, and a Lieutenant-Governor in prospect, (and eventually, as it turned out, a Governor), were saved to the Commonwealth.

And now, after all these years, the hot contestants of that far-distant time, save alone Mr. Parrish, rest within their widely-scattered graves, in everlasting peace.